Identifying Low-Performance Public Schools

Abstract - The growing emphasis on performance in public organizations has reached public schools. In contrast to past attempts to reform process and government, present efforts to reform American schools have focused more directly on performance. Key features of these performance-based reforms in schools as well as other public organizations include: establishing clear, measurable performance standards; granting local actors the autonomy to find the best means of achieving these standards; providing rewards for local actors that achieve performance goals; and developing remedies for cases when goals are not met (King & Mathers, 1997). A majority of states now prepare report cards on individual schools which include test scores and other outcome measures, and a growing number of states use this information to rank, reward or sanction schools and districts (Jerald, 2000).

While receiving less media attention, an important element in performance-based reforms is the identification and improvement of organizations with the lowest performance. In the case of education, at least 19 states have established procedures for identifying low-performance schools and districts (Jerald & Boser, 1999). The 1994 reauthorization of the federal Title I program encouraged more programs of this sort by requiring states and districts that receive Title I money to establish systems, based primarily on student achievement on state-wide assessments, for identifying and improving low-performance schools (Advisory Council to New York State Board of Regents, 1994).

Programs to rank schools on student performance and identify those with low performance face two controversial and difficult sets of issues. The first set of issues concerns how to identify which schools should be classified as having low performance. Although not without critics, the idea that low-performance schools should be identified primarily on the basis of educational outcomes, such as achievement test scores is generally accepted by states with such programs (King & Mathers, 1997). However, several important issues concerning
how to develop reliable identification systems remain unresolved. The second challenge facing these programs is to evaluate the causes of low-performance and determine what actions should be taken to improve organizations identified.

In this paper, we will address the first set of issues in the context of public education - How do state governments identify schools with the lowest student performance? At first glance, the task of identifying low-performance schools would appear quite straight-forward. Simply find the schools with the worst test scores. However, there are several major issues involved in identifying low-performance schools that need to be addressed. Given the potentially serious consequences for the school and its staff, accurate identification methods are crucially important. At a minimum, schools classified as low performance are required to develop an improvement plan. Eventually, assuming no improvement, the school staff may be replaced, the state may take over management, or the school may be closed.